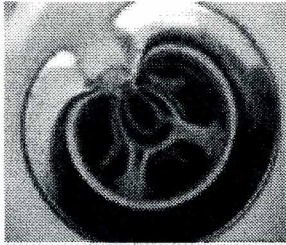


VORTEX:
A video installation by Chris Meigh-Andrews



The wonder of the electronic media is that, though they have such an impact on life, they only ever seem to have a partial existence, flickering in and out of being in a way quite unlike the solid and trustworthy, traditional media of art- sculpture, painting, even photography. Every electronic image blinks into the world and blinks out, its only moment of visibility the very moment of its decay. Photography, and maybe even film, can be picked up and looked at, but the electronic image, like music has to be experienced as a temporal, a temporary, a contemporary tintinnabulation at the edges of a vast silence, an endless nonentity.

The siren images that surround us, that sing us their inescapable songs, are the lure. The electronic artist, like Odysseus, has himself strapped to the mast, the ears uncorked, to hear the unutterable tedium of a song that works every time. The point is not so much that the epic voyager heard the song, but that he was voluntarily immobilised in the kind of passionate paralysis that has underlined much of the most significant art of the last five decades. The whirlpool of images or the rocks of the everyday, the devil of meaninglessness and the deep blue sea of infinitely proliferating messages: the Odyssey still inspires the electronic artist caught between the vapidity and the brilliance of the TV screen.

The question to ask of art now is not what it means, but *how* it means. What is it made of? What is the matter- the material force at play in its persistence, in the way it is or the way it can be perceived? Like others of Chris Meigh-Andrews' installations, its predecessors *Eau d'artifice*, an electronic fountain, and *Streamline*, a video homage to Monet, *Vortex* is made of electricity, the flow of those primordial forces, that even now, we scarcely comprehend, but whose movement approximates to the motions of both water and thought. The flux of electrons and magnetism, the fall of light and the drag of gravity, are the subject and the medium in an art where the two are indistinguishable. In the end, it is made up of the same things as *Bind Date* and *The Bill*, except that it wears the repetition they disavow like a red badge of courage, guarantee

and death-knell of its glory. The harmonies and counterpoints of fluids and languages are more restless and braver than television continuity.

Some people say, with reason, that TV is just radio with pictures, a speech-driven form. But words, when they have no voice to give them some kind of (illusory?) authenticity, the words you have to read, you read with your own voice. Yet that silent inner voice, so intimate and familiar, speaks like a ventriloquist's mannequin when the words are scripted for it: such is the strange communication of reading quietly to yourself the words of another. The written word, read, floats between its material and the illusion of authorship, the writer's or the reader's. It is an anti-gravity machine that allows the letters to surface from the dark labyrinth of the closed book. Words like the animation of light on waves, the plashing and gurgles as they pour across each other.

The sound of the vortex fills the space. TV sound, and most soundtracks in computer games and CD-ROMs, comes from within and behind the screen, an illusory space that locks us into the fixed and foetal curl that typifies an absorbed viewing session. but the sound of *Vortex* occupies the building. It is a sculptural sound, freed of prematurely traditional anchorage in the image to explore the acoustic world with a solidity as appropriate to our times as Early English Perpendicular to theirs.

A Walkman, a car stereo and a police siren are all ways of marking territory:

Vortex's sound is a way of exploring it. And yet, it is recorded sound, a sound that never sounded before as it does now and yet which carries like a scar the trace of an umbilical link to a vanished plunge of water into the silent dark.

What happens at the nub of a whirlpool? What happens at the point at which you are too close to an image or a sound to see or hear it clearly? To fall into the image is to destroy both it and yourself, to come to the lonely instant in which all the illusions falter, and the truth cannot be born. Contemporary art has taken on the work of exploring the real world which philosophy abandoned a hundred years ago. Now there are only scientists and artists who believe in the materials with which they work. At the beginning of the age of the artist-engineer, we must face the immense questions concerning the making of meaning, the meaning of meaning, and the possibility, always present, of the great cloud of unmeaning, madness or possession, that lurks in the chamber of images.

Sean Cubitt,
Wallasey, 19/10/95